

Author of the bestselling
The Brides of the Kindred Series

*Evangeline
Anderson*

*Shadow
Dreams*

Shadow Dreams

Evangeline Anderson

KINDLE EDITION

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Shadow Dreams

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Author's Note:

Shadow Dreams was first published in 2004 at Liquid Silver. It was one of my first books and it has been out of circulation for some time. Now I am bringing it back at the request of several readers who never got a chance to read it in the past. This book also contains a two chapter excerpt of Ruby Shadows, the third book in my Born to Darkness series, which is coming out soon. The total book length is around 33,000 words. Happy Reading!

Evangeline on October 2013

Prologue:
A Navajo Legend

Once there was a boy of the Bitterwater Clan of the Din`e, the Navajo People. He lived with his ma`sani, his grandmother in the Four Corners in the Navajo Nation on the reservation. Life was harsh on the reservation and food was sometimes scarce. The grandmother was worried for her grandson.

"Go," she told the boy. "I will send you to the white man's boarding school so that you may learn and grow and be strong. But you must promise to never forget the ways of the People."

The boy promised and his grandmother sent him away. He spent most of his time in school, and less and less time in the Four Corners. He received scholarships to go to the white man's college and every year he saw his grandmother less. He missed his grandmother, but the dust of the reservation stuck in his throat and the taste of mutton stew was sour on his tongue. The air outside the Four Corners seemed sweeter somehow. The boy soon became a man and began to forget the ways of the Din`e.

Then one day, when the man had finished school and was working and living far away from the Four Corners, he received a call. 'Come back,' he was told. 'Your grandmother is dying.'

The man rushed back to his grandmother's hogan to find her lying with her head to the North—the

direction of death.

"Grandmother," he said. "I'm so sorry, I never should have left you." But he spoke in English, not in Navajo and she couldn't understand him.

"Ya`at`eeh," she told him, taking his hand. "Welcome. In all the time you were gone I thought of you every night and every day," she said. "I prayed for the day when I would see you again with a good Din`e woman as your wife and children of your own to warm my old heart. But you come back to the Four Corners more empty than when you left. Where is your wife? Where are your children?"

The man tried to explain that he had filled his days learning the white man's law and was too busy to find a wife or have children, but again, he spoke English and his ma`sani couldn't understand.

"Speak the language I taught you," she told him. "Let me hear the words of the Din`e come from your mouth before I die so that my spirit can be released with joy."

The man opened his mouth but found to his shame that he had forgotten every word of Navajo. He could understand his grandmother, but when he tried to say it back to her, his tongue was like lead in his mouth and the words were ashes and dust on his lips. They blew away before he could catch them.

"Speak to me!" the old woman cried angrily. "All I ask is a few words in my native tongue before I die."

But the man could not. He shook his head, frowning.

"Da`iisolts`aa—Listen," his grandmother said, taking his young, strong hand in her old, crippled one. "You didn't visit me very often ... this I can forgive. But you broke the promise you made when I sent you away. You have forgotten the ways of the Din`e and that cannot be forgiven."

"Grandmother," he tried to say, but she hushed him again.

"This is the curse I leave on you, my grandson. This is my death curse so listen carefully. For the next three months you will live the life of a leechaa`, a dog.

"You will wander the streets like a chindi, an evil spirit that nobody wants. For three nights during these three months when the full moon is in the sky you will have the power to be a man again. During this time you must find a woman of the Din`e who will believe in you. She must have courage and love in her heart, enough love to embrace you and the ways of the People which you have forgotten.

"When you find this woman, you will find the true man in your heart and the outward appearance will reflect the inward once again. This way, when I look down from the Spirit World I will be able to see the great-grandchildren that you did not give me in life.

"If you do not find a woman to believe in you in the next three months, then you must wander the world as a dog forever, never finding a place to call home."

And with that, she died.

Chapter One

"Come on, Angelina we talked about this already. You don't feel safe in that big house all alone at night and this is the perfect solution." My best friend, Barbara, was in lecture mode—I could always tell when she used my full name.

"Barb's right, Jelly." My other best friend, Patricia, snapped her gum (she was trying to quit smoking) and shoved a hand through her mane of black hair, making the many gold bangles she was wearing jingle. "Besides, this guy looks friendly and you could use a little male companionship lately. Other than your dream lovah that is."

Barb rolled her big brown eyes and pulled a pen out from behind her ear, being careful not to mess up her sensibly short rust-colored hair. "I think someone has seen *Last of the Mohicans* one two many times," she muttered, fishing in her purse for a notepad. "Let's make a list. C'mon, Jelly, pros and cons."

"Hey, I was drunk when I told you guys about that dream," I protested, feeling my cheeks start to burn. With my fair hair and pale skin you can always tell in a minute when I'm embarrassed. "No fair using ammunition from margarita night. You know I can't hold my liquor."

"Whatever." Patty grinned and popped her gum again. And I had thought second hand smoke was annoying. I reminded myself to buy her some mints to suck on instead.

"Pros and cons," Barbara reminded us. She was a CPA and terribly practical. Making a list was her solution to almost any dilemma. The weird thing was that it usually helped. "I'll start," she said. "Protection." She scratched away at the notepad.

"Male companionship," Patty said promptly, raising her voice to be heard above the increased noise around us. She grinned at me and wiggled her eyebrows.

I sighed and looked at them. We'd been tight since high school when we had gone by the nickname of PB&J, and I knew my friends were right. The only problem was that the 'male' companion we were currently looking at had four paws and a tail. And he was behind bars—we were at the local animal shelter trying to pick a pet to keep me company now that my divorce was final.

"I don't know," I said, raising my voice to be heard above the suddenly increased barking. We were in the outdoor part of the shelter, which was divided into long rows of chain-link separated runs. The dog runs had roofs on them to keep the animals inside safe from heat stroke but the walk-way between them was open to the sky. The four o'clock sun was beating on my head like a golden hammer, making it hard to think. People can talk about the climate in Arizona being a 'dry' heat all they want. When it gets to 120 degrees in the shade, you're going to sweat whether there's humidity or not. This August was turning out to be a real scorcher and I felt like I was about to melt.

"What's not to know? He seems like a great guy, aren't you fella?" Patty leaned over and wiggled her fingers through the chain link of the fence in a way that made me nervous. The dog inside the run looked as big as a small pony and he could have taken off her whole hand with a single bite. His fur was as coal-black and his big, bushy tail was beating a frantic rhythm against the rattling fence, adding to the general cacophony of the place.

"I've just ... never been much of a dog person," I said weakly, watching as the huge black dog licked Patty's hand with doggy enthusiasm. But I knew I was just stalling. Ever since my ex-husband, Douglas, had moved out six months ago after informing me that he was seeing someone else, the big Victorian house my Grandmother had left me had been terribly lonely. I kept hearing bumps in the night and suspicious sounds that were keeping her up. It didn't help that the house was situated on the western outskirts of Phoenix at the base of the White Tank Mountains. It was one of the last places in

the city that had yet to be developed fully and I couldn't even see my nearest neighbor, just desert plants and the occasional coyote.

I was tired of lying in an empty bed at night, worried about the strange creaking of the old house around me and wishing for a man to keep me warm at night. Of course, since it had turned out that the person Douglas was seeing was his personal trainer, Justin, I supposed I wasn't the only one in my now-defunct marriage that wanted a warm man in bed. I guess my ex-husband took the whole 'buns of steel' thing a little too literally.

Getting a dog wasn't a perfect solution, but at least I wouldn't have to be so afraid at night anymore. I had never lived on my own before the divorce and being the only living soul in the big old house was making me jumpy. So jumpy that I was having weird dreams, which I now regretted telling to my two best friends.

"I mean, what breed is he anyway? He looks like a cross between a pony and a wolf," I said, fiddling nervously with the tight bun of hair rolled at the back of my sweating neck.

"He's a mutt—a mixed breed," said a new voice behind us. The three of us swung around at the same time to see a no-nonsense woman with mannishly short brown hair wearing khakis and a navy-blue polo shirt with logo of the shelter stitched on the pocket. She was carrying a clipboard with both hands but she transferred it to one and held the other out to me. "You're the prospective adopter?"

I shook her hand, wondering how she could tell. "Well, yes," I said hesitantly. "I'm thinking about it anyway."

"Any kids or older people living with you?" she asked, consulting the clipboard.

"Well, no. Ever since my div—I live by myself," I concluded.

The woman smiled. "Well then, Shadow here might just be the dog for you."

"Shadow?" I raised my eyebrows at the unimaginative name. "Why not just name him 'Midnight' or 'Charcoal' or something like that?"

"You're free to change it, of course," she said. (Not getting at all what I was saying.) "I asked about the possibility of children or elderly people in your household because Shadow is on his second strike. He was picked up about two months ago and the first family that took him had young children. They brought him back the next day because he growled when their toddler pulled his tail and it scared them."

"Did he threaten the child?" Barb had her pen poised over the 'cons' column on her notepad.

"No, just growled." The shelter worker shrugged. "Some dogs are more tolerant of kids than others. Especially poorly disciplined kids." She raised one eyebrow significantly.

"You said second strike. Was there another family?" Barbara asked. Patricia, popping her gum, had wandered off to play with a puffy Pomeranian down the row.

"There was, an elderly couple," the woman admitted, glancing at the clipboard again.

"Did he growl at them too?" I asked nervously, eyeing the black pony-wolf behind the fence. He whined and tucked his tail between his legs, giving me an imploring look from big brown eyes.

"No, he was just too much dog for them. He's not a puppy anymore—we think he's four or five, actually—but it's still hard for an elderly person to control such a big animal. You have to have some strength and the energy to keep up with them. Shadow here loves to run and play, I recommend you take him to the park several times a week. Do you have a big back yard?"

"It's fairly large." I rubbed at the back of my neck again. She was talking like the matter was already decided.

"Perfect." She made a mark on the clipboard.

"Wait a minute, you're telling us this dog has been returned twice but you want my friend to take it?" You couldn't put anything over on Barbara. She was the kind of friend you took along when you went to buy a car and didn't want the dealer to screw you.

"Shadow's a good dog—what we call a one person dog. When he finds the person who's right for him, it'll be a perfect match. You can't find a more loyal friend and protector than a dog who's—completely devoted to you."

"Wow, too bad you can't get a man like that." Patty had wandered back over, apparently tired of the Pomeranian.

"Well you can't," I snapped, a bit too harshly. Then I sighed. "I'm sorry, it's just been a long day and I'm tired. Maybe we should come back some other time."

The strong smell of dog and other odors that pervaded the place was beginning to give me a headache. My sensible heels crunched as I shifted my feet in the loose gravel outside the runs.

"Do you really want to spend another long weekend alone in that creepy old house?" Barbara countered at once, looking up from her notebook.

"All by yourself with your 'dream Indian'?" Patty added. She said it under her breath but I elbowed her anyway.

"You can, of course, elect to come back on Monday since we're closed this weekend, but I'm afraid Shadow will be gone by then." The shelter woman crossed her arms across a very flat chest.

"What? Somebody else wants him?" Patty went back to wiggling her fingers through the chain-link of his run.

"No. He's scheduled to be euthanized—put to sleep. We get so many animals we can only keep them for a month or so and then if they don't get adopted, well..." She shrugged, spreading her hands. Behind her Shadow flattened his ears and whined, a high, sad sound that was almost human.

"Gee, no pressure," Patty muttered. "Jelly, would you stop?" she protested when I elbowed her again.

"Can we ... could I take him out and pet him?" I asked, almost against my will. The dog was looking at me with those big brown eyes and his tail was wagging in small, hopeful arcs. If he was a person, I would have sworn he was begging me to take him.

"No problem." The shelter worker produced a set of keys that jingled musically against the fence as she unlocked the dog's run. She bent down to the dog's level and called to him. "Come on, Shadow. Come on, boy," she encouraged in a much softer voice than she had used with us. "Come meet this nice lady."

The dog came out at once completely ignoring the shelter worker's soft voice and Patty's attempt to lure him closer by patting her knees. Padding over the gravel he came straight to me, lay down at my feet and rested his huge head on my right foot. Then he stared up at me soulfully, and whined softly in the back of his throat.

"Aw, look at that." Even Barbara was completely taken by the dog's performance.

"What a sweetie," Patty cooed, reaching down to ruffle his fur. Her touch had no effect; the dog ignored her completely. But the minute I reached down to stroke the big, shaggy head he was on his feet and rubbing against me eagerly. A big warm, taffy-pink tongue came out and swiped my hand enthusiastically.

"Eew." I wiped my palm reflexively against the side of my skirt and then wished I hadn't. Like my dry cleaning bill wasn't big enough already. The dog nuzzled me apologetically and I patted him again. This time there was no licking. I rubbed behind his ears and those big eyes closed in apparent ecstasy as he enjoyed the attention. His long tail thumped against the gravel.

"He's really taken with you," the shelter worker said. The dog whined as if in agreement.

"Are you a good boy?" I asked him softly. "What a good boy, Shadow."

"Look, we don't usually do this, but why don't you take him on a trial basis?" The shelter worker straightened up and looked at her clipboard again. "I'll get the paperwork ready. You take him tonight."

and keep him over the weekend. If it doesn't work out you can bring him back Monday morning. If it does, keep him and mail us the paperwork or else just drop it off with a check for the adoption fee."

"Oh no, the fee is taken care of," Patty protested. "We'll pay it right now, won't we, Barb?"

"Not a problem." Barbara was already whipping out her Visa.

"Guys, no," I protested. "You don't have to do this, really."

"But we want to." Barb was already bustling back into the shelter with the worker.

"Consider it a 'happy divorce' gift. He's not the 'man of your dreams' but what are you gonna do?"

Patty gave my arm a little squeeze.

I sighed and patted the dog again. "You're never gonna let that dream drop, are you?"

She grinned and popped her gum. "Nope. Barb and I don't like the idea of you being all alone in that spooky house with no protection. Not like Douglas was big in the home security department or anything, but at least he was another warm body."

"If you trampled his roses he'd be pretty upset and protective," I pointed out.

Douglas had spent more time in the garden than in our bedroom the last year of our marriage, caring for his precious prize-winning roses. (In Arizona they can bloom all year round with proper care.) I sometimes thought he'd put off announcing his intention to divorce me just so he could see the rare Lady Penzance Eglantine roses he'd bought and nurtured at great expense bloom. They were his pride and joy, and I knew it had just about killed him to leave them when he moved out.

"Beating up would-be garden vandals isn't my idea of a real man." Patty looked skeptical. "You've been alone in that house for six months. If you won't move in with Barb or me, then this is the next best thing."

"I know you didn't grow up with dogs the way I did, but let me tell you, I think this is a good one. Aren't you boy?" She ruffled the dog's fur and got no reaction. "Hmph." She crossed her arms over her chest, gold bangles jangling.

"Looks like he's only got eyes for you."

The dog looked up at us and barked once, as if in agreement. I could have sworn his eyes were laughing.

Chapter Two

"What am I gonna do with you, huh?" I plopped the grocery bags full of dog food, toys and paraphernalia that Barb and Patty had insisted on buying for me down on my kitchen counter, and turned to face Shadow who was sitting quietly, watching me. He had already made a short tour of the downstairs section of the house, but he appeared to prefer to be with me than scouting around.

"I mean, don't get me wrong," I continued. "You're a nice guy, but I never expected to be a dog owner, let alone speak dog." Though Patty had baby-talked him all the way home, it just seemed wrong to me somehow. Shadow had his head cocked just as though he was listening to me and there was no one there to see me carry on an adult conversation with a dog.

"I tell you what," I picked up the sheaf of blank adoption forms along with the free certificate for neutering that had come with the dog and shook them at him for emphasis. "We'll give it the weekend and see how it goes. You'd better be very good or we'll have to call it quits, understand?"

Shadow whined and came forward, nudging the hand with the papers.

"Oh, all right." I put down the papers and scratched behind his ears, making him close his eyes in ecstasy again. It was a little disconcerting to suddenly own such a large animal; his head came up to my waist easily and if he stood on his hind paws he would almost be taller than me. *It's just a trial*, I reminded myself, scratching behind the sharply pointed black ears.

"What about some dinner?" I asked him.

He barked once, as if to say, 'took you long enough.'

"All right." I took out the brand new double doggie bowl and put it down on the kitchen floor. I opened the ridiculously expensive bag of gourmet dog food Patty had insisted on buying (though Shadow continued to ignore her, she was in love with him) and poured some in. Adding water to the other side of the bowl, I dusted my hands and said, "There."

Shadow looked at me, then at the food, then back at me again. He walked over to the bowl, sniffed and took a few delicate nibbles then sat down to watch me. "You sure don't eat much for such a big guy," I remarked, washing my hands to start my own dinner. Maybe he had eaten right before we picked him out. I turned to my brushed steel, top-of-the-line refrigerator and pulled open the door to see what was available.

Douglas had insisted on remodeling the entire kitchen when we first moved into my Grandma's old house. Cooking was another one of his hobbies and he only wanted the best equipment and appliances. I went along with it although I missed the mellow gleam of polished oak, and thought the cold, brushed steel and black marble that replaced it was a poor substitute for the sunny kitchen I had loved as a little girl. Now that Douglas was gone I was stuck with a high-tech kitchen and no one to use it. Most nights nuking a Lean Cuisine was as gourmet as I got.

Tonight was special though. It was Friday night and I had no date, but at least I had a warm body to share the house with. Dog or not, at least Shadow was another living, breathing being I could talk to, even if he did only answer in barks and whines. I pulled out a bottle of red wine and all the fixings for a really nice field-greens salad—goat cheese, pine nuts and a light balsamic vinaigrette.

Patty had me hooked on this particular salad, although being the artistic one in our group she made it more elaborate. Grape tomatoes, sliced Fuji apples, candied walnuts, whatever suited her fancy at the time—it was never the same salad twice. I liked to stick to the basics as my creativity came out in different ways.

Or it had, anyway.

I sighed as I realized I hadn't even tried to write anything in over a year. Ever since my marriage started to fold I'd had writer's block in the worst way and it didn't help that my ex-husband had thought my literary efforts were laughable.

I tossed the salad and put it in a blue glazed terra cotta bowl decorated with Aztec symbols around the edge. ~~A souvenir of our honeymoon in Mexico. Damn. It's been six months, already, just let it go,~~ I told myself, but it wasn't easy advice to follow.

"You know why you're here?" I turned to face Shadow who was still watching me with his head cocked to one side. "You're here because my husband dumped me. Not just for another woman either no—it was another man," I told him.

I picked up my salad and the glass of red wine and moved to the breakfast nook. I took a long swallow of wine and continued. "I mean, I should have seen it, right? He loved to garden, he was a gourmet chef, he re-decorated this whole damn place on his own. Not that a straight man couldn't do all that—I'm not talking about a stereotype per se here," I told the dog.

I plopped down at the small round table and took another big sip of wine. "But I should have figured out a little bit earlier why his favorite TV show was *Queer as Folk*. Well written plot my ass. Hell, the fact that we only had sex once a month could have given me a clue." I picked at the salad morosely. "I guess I just didn't *want* to know," I said in a low voice.

Shadow padded over to me and laid his huge head on my knee with a low whine. I fondled his fuzzy ears and let my tears fall. Six months and it still hadn't quite sunk in that Douglas was gone forever. I kept expecting him to call me up or come over and say that it was all a big mistake.

He'd say, "So sorry Angie, I'm not gay after all." I knew in my heart it was never going to happen, but the pain was just too fresh to let go. My ex-husband was such a jerk, why did I still let him affect me so much?

"Sorry, boy, I'm a mess," I mumbled. "Maybe I should just go to bed. Shame about the salad." I had barely touched it.

I took the blue Aztec bowl over to the sink to scrape the remains of my meal down the disposal but Shadow got between me and the black marble and butted me with his head, whining.

"What?" I asked, annoyed. He sat on his haunches and raised his front paws in the air. Clearly he was begging.

"Look, Shadow, I know it's in a big blue bowl just like yours but there's nothing in here you want, Okay? Here, see for yourself." I set the bowl on the ceramic tiles and let him have a sniff. "No sausage, no bacon, no..." I stopped.

The dog was eating the salad like it was going out of style. He was (and you should pardon the pun) absolutely wolfing it down.

In a matter of minutes he polished it off, licking the bowl clean with a few delicate swipes of his long pink tongue. He sat back on his haunches and barked once, as though telling me he was finished.

I shook my head. "A dog that likes salad, go figure. All right, so you're unique." I set the bowl in the sink and finished the wine in my glass then thought, what the hell, why not drink it all? I'm not usually much of a drinker but I was feeling depressed and reckless. I decided I would take a bath and finish the bottle of wine before hitting the sack.

There aren't many sensual pleasures left for the single gal—a hot bath and a bottle of wine were two of them. If only I had some chocolate my night would be complete.

"C'mon, boy, time for you to go out for the night." I walked to the door that led out to the walled in back yard and yanked it open. "Go on, Shadow. Good boy," I encouraged.

The dog looked at the door and back to me but didn't budge an inch. He whined appealingly. The message was clear: he didn't want to go out for the night.

I sighed. "Oh, what the hell. The shelter lady did say you were house-trained."

I re-locked the back door and grabbed a folded copy of the paper just in case.

"C'mon, boy." I motioned towards the stairs and this time the dog came at once.

The master bedroom had been my Grandma's and it was the only room I'd absolutely refused to let

Douglas redecorate. Now that he was gone, I was very, *very* glad I had put my foot down. The bedroom was the one place I could relax, a sanctuary of mellow hardwood floors and furniture, polished to a muted shine by years of beeswax polish and TLC from Grandma.

The big old four-poster bed was spread with one of her handmade quilts, a pattern of yellow butterflies and pale pink tulips. Douglas had sneered at her old-fashioned work, but I liked the bright cheerful fabric.

Shadow padded into the room at my heels. His massive wolf-like head swinging from side to side as he regarded everything. Before I flicked on the lamp beside the bed, I saw that moonlight was pouring in through the wide windows on either side. The moon wasn't full yet but it soon would be. I wondered if Shadow would howl like the wolf he resembled, but he sat silently in the shadows until the golden warmth from the low-watt bulb lit the room.

"Okay, boy, here's the deal," I told him. I put the half-empty bottle of wine down on the nightstand and began to spread the paper out sheet over sheet on the far side of the bed. "I'm going to let you stay here tonight provided any 'accidents' stay on the paper." I pointed meaningfully at the sheets of newsprint covering the hardwood floor. I knew it was more of a puppy thing but having never owned a dog before, I didn't want to take any chances that Shadow might not be completely house-trained.

The dog walked over to the papers, toenails clicking on the floor, sniffed them and gave me a look that I would have sworn was offended.

"Fine," I said. "Then I guess we understand each other. Now ..." I began to unbutton my shirt. "I am going to take a long, hot bath and kill the rest of this bottle of wine. It's been a long damn day and I deserve it. I don't usually drink, you know." I stripped off the shirt and my skirt as well, wondering why I felt the need to explain myself to a dog. "But tonight's a special occasion. It's not every day you've been divorced for six whole months."

I turned and stripped off my bra and panties, wincing as I noticed the slight red marks the too-tight bra had left on my shoulders. Barb was always telling me I should look into reduction but Patty always countered that I should keep my generous breasts because men loved breasts. This argument of appearance versus comfort summed up my two best friends to a tee. Personally, I liked my breasts, despite the problem finding bras that didn't leave marks. An 'over the shoulder boulder holder', that's what we had called a bra for someone with boobs my size in high school.

I turned back around, thumbs hooked in the waistband of my silky blue bikini panties, all ready to pull them down when a look at my new dog stopped me. He hadn't moved any closer but he had his head cocked to one side and he was staring at me intently. Feeling uncomfortable for no reason I could really define, I grabbed the bottle of wine and headed for the bathroom. Shadow started to follow but I made an imperative motion.

"No—you stay here. I'm a private bathroom person and I don't know you well enough to let you watch me take a bath." I felt ridiculous as soon as the words left my mouth. He was just a dog, after all. Maybe he was lonely and unsure of himself in a new, big house with a new master he barely knew... But I just couldn't shake the feeling that he was watching me and I've always been a very modest person. If the dog was going to stay with me, he was just going to have to get used to my rule.

Shadow whined appealingly and gave me the big brown puppy dog eyes, almost as though he could read my internal conflict. But my mind was made up.

"No," I said firmly. I went into the bathroom, shut the door in his doggy face and started a tub of water running.

The bathtub was another antique left over from Grandma's days—a free-standing, claw footed monstrosity big enough to really wallow in. I turned out the lights, lit a cinnamon scented candle and used my best foaming bath oil.

There's nothing like a good hot soak after a stressful day. I unpinned my hair and let it fall around

my shoulders in a silky mass before stepping into the foaming bubbles. I sighed deeply as I relaxed into the water that was just this side of too hot. Grabbing the bottle of wine from the tiled floor beside the tub I took a big swig directly from the bottle. Not very lady-like, I supposed—Douglas would be horrified. Not that I gave a damn.

As I sank into the bubbles, letting the tension of the day melt away, I wondered if I would have my dream again that night. It was funny because my Grandmother used to claim that when you had the same dream over and over again it meant your life was going to change. It was a gift, she said, from our Navajo ancestry—she had been half Navajo herself but to look at me with my blond hair and dark green eyes, you would never guess that a drop of Navajo blood ran in my veins. The Danish blood from my Father's side completely overwhelmed it.

I had loved my Grandmother dearly, but to be honest I didn't believe that I had any kind of a 'dream gift'. I was more likely that I had been without sex so long my subconscious was trying to make up for it. Didn't take a Freud to figure that one out.

The dream I had been having lately was different from any other dream I've ever had before. It wasn't frightening or a nightmare but there was a darker flavor to it. I took another swig of wine.

"Darker, hell," I said to myself. "Erotic is more like it, Angelina. Why not admit it?"

I know I'm starting to get drunk when I start talking out loud to myself. Outside the bathroom door Shadow whined softly and I told him to hush. Maybe it was time to lay off the wine.

I put down the bottle and sank lower in the tub, not caring that the bubbles were getting into my hair. Maybe if I just closed my eyes for a moment the dream would come to me ... I was almost ashamed to admit that I had begun to look forward to it. Barb had attributed it to one too many viewings of *Last of the Mohicans* but I didn't think so—the man in my dreams didn't look like any of the characters. But then again, he *was* an Indian, or Native American, I supposed, was the more PC term.

Regardless of the terminology, it didn't seem terribly likely that I was going to be swept off my feet any time soon by a sexy savage. That kind of thing just didn't happen outside a romance book, did it? No, I told myself. This was no life changing event, it was just a dream.

I sank down until the bubbles were just under my chin, thinking that the water was getting cool and I would have to run some more in just a moment. But first I would just rest my eyes a little...

Chapter Three

The next thing I knew someone was lifting me out of the tub. I must have fallen asleep because the water was ice-cold and I was shivering. I was slippery from the bath oil and all my limbs felt loose and disjointed from the wine so he was having a hard time getting hold of me.

"Who..." I tried to ask as he finally draped me over one broad shoulder and hauled me out that way.

"Never mind. You wouldn't remember if I told you now anyway." The voice that answered my question was low and firm and the arms that were holding me felt exceptionally strong.

He sat me on the edge of the tub and grabbed a towel, rubbing the rough terrycloth over my dripping limbs carefully. I shivered convulsively, realizing how cold I was and my skin broke out in a rash of goosebumps. The AC in this part of the house was turned on full-blast, the better to combat the heat of the day and sitting in the chilly air after being pulled from the icy water was most unpleasant.

You would have thought that the sudden chill and the drop in my body temperature would have cleared my head somewhat, but the large amounts of wine I had consumed were still working on me and I felt half asleep despite, or maybe because of, my lowered body temperature.

It seemed like I ought to be afraid of this strange man who was suddenly in my house. There had been some disturbing reports in the news lately. A serial rapist was loose in my area code.

Somehow, though, I just couldn't make myself panic the way I knew I should. Maybe because it didn't seem likely that a prospective rapist would take the time to dry me off before getting on with his intended crime.

"Must've fallen asleep in the bath," I muttered.

"Mmhm," he agreed. "If you'd stayed in there much longer you probably woulda frozen to death. I tried to get you to come out earlier but you told me to shut up."

"Huh?" I wanted to state that I had never seen him before in my life and in fact, I wasn't seeing very much of him now. He was just a large shape in the cinnamon-scented gloom of my bathroom. My brain was too muddled by the wine to process this thought, however, and so the inarticulate 'huh' was all that came out.

"Never mind," he said again and sighed. He finished drying me and lifted me gently into his arms. "Guess we'll just have to write tonight off."

I wanted to ask what he meant but something even less intelligent than 'huh' might have come out so I kept my mouth shut. I was still terribly cold but being held in his arms was like being close to a portable furnace. He was warm to touch and I pressed my icy cheek against the bare, muscular chest and breathed in a scent like dry sand and warm fur and musk.

He shouldered the door of the bathroom open, carrying me like I weighed no more than a doll (which is certainly not the case) and laid me gently on the bed. Someone had already turned down the covers and he slid me beneath the cool cotton sheets and pulling my Grandma's colorful quilt up to my chin, tucking me in snugly.

It occurred to me again that I ought to be concerned that a strange man was in my bedroom and putting me to bed but the red wine still sloshing around in my system kept me from getting too excited. My eyes wanted to close but I forced them to stay open, trying to study him in the darkness of the bedroom.

Someone had turned out the lamp but the light of the nearly-full moon shone through my window showing a face with high cheekbones, dark eyes that I thought might be brown, and strong, hawk-like features.

For some reason he looked vaguely familiar. Long straight hair the color of midnight fell down to

bare, broad shoulders. My eyes continued down a muscular torso and lean hips and I realized uneasily that my bathtub savior was as naked as I was. Naked and very well endowed if the sizable shadow between his legs was any indication.

"You ... you're naked," I muttered, gesturing vaguely at his lower body which was mostly hidden in the shadows.

"So?" He sat on the side of the bed and brushed the hair off my forehead with a gentle hand. "So are you," he pointed out.

I wanted to answer but my teeth started chattering. Being separated from his heat and put into the cold bed was too much for my alcohol weakened system.

He frowned, looking like a thundercloud. "Look at you, freezing to death. Guess I'll have to warm you up." He pulled up the covers and bumped me gently with his hip, indicating I should move over.

"Wait a minute..." I felt my foggy brain trying to react to the situation. This was definitely not right, no matter how drunk and disoriented I was.

"You wanna freeze to death?" he growled, giving me a stern look from those dark eyes.

Hesitantly, I shook my head. The gap in the covers had caused me to break out in gooseflesh all over again and I was shivering from head to toe.

"All right then, I won't bite. Never did before, did I?"

It wasn't biting I was concerned with but somehow he was in the bed before I could say anything.

He turned to face me and demanded, "Come here."

I don't know if I would've gone to him or not but he didn't wait for me to come. Instead, he gathered me close in his arms, pillowing my head on his hard bicep while he rubbed briskly over my back and sides with large, warm hands.

Acting on instinct I huddled close to his heat, feeling it penetrate my bones. At last my shivering stopped.

"That's better, isn't it?" he murmured, pulling me even closer. His deep voice vibrated through me deliciously and the brisk rubbing had turned to long, lazy strokes over my sides and back. His musky wild scent filled my senses and I became aware that something hard and hot was branding my lower belly.

This wasn't right—I didn't even know him. I tried to pull away but he held me close.

"I won't hurt you, just want to hold you. I promise not to do anything you don't want."

I was still trying to wrap my mind around that statement when it occurred to me why he had looked so familiar. He was the man in my dreams.

Just another dream, I thought and was surprised how disappointed I was. But at least it allowed me to relax. He was only a dream, and dreams can't hurt you.

"I know 'bout you," I murmured, feeling my eyelids grow heavy again. "In the morning you'll be gone."

He sighed and his arms tightened around me.

"Yeah, you're right. I was hoping to make a little more headway tonight but the moon will be setting soon. You're in no condition to listen anyway."

I wanted to ask what the moon had to do with anything but my eyelids felt like they had been dipped in lead.

He tilted my chin up and gave me a soft kiss on the lips. His mouth was warm and firm and he buried one hand in my hair to hold me in place and explored me thoroughly while his thickness throbbed against my belly. He tasted wild—delicious. The kiss made my heart pound despite the fact that I knew it was only a dream. Strange though, my dreams had never been quite this vivid before.

"Your husband was a fool," he whispered, releasing my mouth at last and stroking one large hand through my hair.

I opened my mouth to say something, I don't know what, but just then I lost the fight with my leaden
dipped eyelids and everything went black.

Chapter Four

The next morning I awoke with a hideous hangover and the knowledge that I would have to go into the office and finish some work I had left. I had conveniently put this out of my mind the night before when I decided to kill most of a bottle of strong red wine by myself.

Groaning, I sat up in bed, wincing as the morning sun lanced at my eyeballs. Shadow came around to my side of the bed and licked my knee with his warm, taffy-pink tongue.

"Ugh, I feel horrible," I told him, scratching absently behind his pointed black ears. "This is why I shouldn't drink."

He gave a short, sharp bark that sounded somehow disapproving. The sound seemed to go straight through my head like an iron spike in my brain.

I winced and pushed him away.

"Keep it to yourself, buddy," I said, staggering out of bed on legs that felt like crooked sticks. The dog looked down at myself. Why was I naked? I never slept in the buff even when Douglas and I were married. For one thing he never seemed to take the hint and for another there was no point in going to bed naked when the person you were sleeping with refused to cuddle.

Despite the Arizona heat, I was cold natured so I mostly slept in a long sleep-shirt. (My favorite one had been a gift from Patty and had 'sleep diva' printed in pink glitter letters across the front.) But now here I was, naked as the day I was born. Come to think of it, I couldn't even remember getting out of the tub and getting into the bed.

I had a brief flash of memory—something about a large man drying me off and talking about the moon? The feel of a hard body against mine and a long, delicious kiss ... but then it was gone again.

I shook my head. "I must've really been out of it last night," I muttered, going to the bathroom to start the water for a hot shower.

I let Shadow out into my back yard while I fixed breakfast which mainly consisted of strong black coffee. He sniffed around excitedly and then went modestly behind a tree to answer the call of nature. He came back immediately when he was finished and whined at the door to be let in.

I had thought to leave him outside in the yard to play and explore while I did my time at work but the appealing look in his big brown eyes changed my mind. I opened the door and gestured with my coffee mug.

"All right then, if you're sure you'd rather be cooped up in the house all day than play outside."

He gave a short bark that I took to mean yes.

"Well, I know it isn't much fun to be stuck in here with no company, boy." I talked to him as I led him into the den which had hardwood floors and seemed the ideal place to leave him. "I'm sorry I have to leave you alone when we're still getting used to each other," I told him as I spread the morning paper out in front of the brown and white spotted leather 'cow-hide' couch.

Douglas had thought it would be fun to have a Southwestern theme for this room, but he had taken many of the decorative touches with him when he moved out. All that remained was the ridiculous couch and a large, potted cactus in one corner.

There was still a big screen TV, however, and I grabbed the remote and flipped channels until I got to 'Animal Planet.'

"There, that oughta keep you happy," I told the big dog, ruffling my hand through his fur.

In a motion so fast I barely saw it, he leaned up suddenly and caught my hand gently between his powerful jaws. The big eyes looked sad and he whined softly in the back of his throat.

I held my breath for a moment. He could bite my hand off with no problem if he wanted too.

A voice in the back of my head whispered, *I won't bite. Never did before, did I?*

I shook my head. Where was that coming from? A muddled remnant of last night's dream, no doubt.

"Let me go now, Shadow. Good boy," I said softly, tugging gently at my captured hand. He released me immediately and I examined my palm and fingers but there wasn't so much as a tooth-print or a scratch. In hindsight, the gesture hadn't seemed aggressive at all. It was more like he was begging me not to go.

Shadow whined again.

"I know, boy, but I've just gotta go in and finish this project or my boss will skin me alive come Monday. We have a big client coming for a presentation. Tell you what," I wiped my damp hand on the inside of my jacket, mentally racking up another dry-cleaning charge. "I promise when I come home we'll go to the park for a run. Won't that be fun?"

He looked at me doubtfully and then padded over to the cow-skin couch and plopped onto it. Dropping his head on his front paws, he gave me the most desolate look imaginable. Geeze—talk about a guilt trip.

I shook my head. I was losing it, letting my dog make me feel guilty.

Placing the remote firmly on top of the big-screen TV, which was now showing a documentary on the wildlife of Australia, I gave him a final wave and went to work.

My cell phone rang when I was only a third of the way through the dreaded report that sat on my desk like a dead fish.

"So how's your new buddy workin' out?" I could tell by the smacking sound in my ear that Patty was gnawing her way through yet another pack of Hubba-Bubba.

"He's great," I said, wincing and pulling the phone away as she popped a bubble loudly. "You think you could spit out the gum for just a minute?"

"Can't, Jelly." I heard another bubble, this one slightly smaller pop. "If I spit it out for one second I'm headed straight for the Virgie Slims hidden in my underwear drawer."

"Patty," I scolded. "You said you threw all of them out."

"So I lied." I could almost hear her shrug over the phone. "But I haven't had a single one since I quit, I swear. It just kinda helps to know they're there. You know, just in case."

"All right." I sighed. "I'm hardly the one to be lecturing anybody about bad habits. I killed almost whole bottle of wine by myself last night. Don't even know how I got to bed." I had a brief flash of strong arms lifting me out of the bathtub and then pushed it away. Crazy dream.

I heard Patty suck in her breath. "Oh-la-la, that's quite a bender for our little Jelly," she snickered, not unkindly. "And what, may I ask, brought on such bacchanal excesses?"

"*Bacchanal excesses?*" I snorted. "Now you sound like Barbara."

"It's from the word a day calendar she gave me," Patty admitted. "But I'm pretty sure it means what I think it means. You can barely get through a glass and a half of wine without getting either all giggly or horribly weepy. What possessed you to try and down a whole bottle?"

"I dunno." I fiddled with the half-done report on my desk and looked out the window at the clear blue sky, wishing I was someplace working on my own material instead of stuck here at work. Why had I bothered to get an English degree if I was only going to use it to write Ad copy? "The whole Douglas thing—six months to the day and everything I guess," I said.

"Oh honey," Patty was instantly all sympathy. "I'm so sorry. One of us should have stayed with you last night ... I didn't even think..."

"Don't be silly," I cut her off. "I'm a big girl. Besides, I had Shadow to keep me company and you're right, he seems like a really good dog. I think he's a keeper."

"Well I'm glad to hear that at least," she said, smacking her gum again. "Specially since he's already bought and paid for."

"Yeah," I stacked paperwork to have something to do with my hands. "He even came with a free neutering certificate, you know? I'm supposed to get him fixed as soon as possible—it was in the agreement I signed."

Patty laughed. "I'd be careful about that, Jelly. It's just like in that old joke, ya know?"

"What joke?" I asked, feeling a little annoyed. Sometimes it seemed like Patty took everything too lightly. I had taken this animal as a responsibility and by-God I was going to live up to my end of the bargain, which included neutering.

"You know," Patty smacked again. "The one about the old lady walking her poodle and she finds a genie bottle on the beach? She rubs the bottle and out comes a genie and he says he'll give her three wishes. So she says, 'I want to be young.' 'Granted,' says the genie and bang—she's young. So she says 'I want to be beautiful.' 'Granted.' Bang—she's gorgeous. Then he says, 'You got one wish left. What do you want?' She looks around and says, 'I want my little Fifi here to be a big strong man instead of little poodle.' 'Granted,' says the genie and bang—Fifi's a total stud. So the genie disappears and ... a

you ready for this?"

"Yeah, I'm listening," I said, still toying with the paperwork.

Patty snickered. "So Fifi the stud turns to her and says, 'Don't you wish you hadn't gotten me fixed?' Pretty good, huh?"

I laughed dutifully, privately thinking it was pretty silly. "Okay, Patty. If I'm ever gonna get out of here today I have to let you go and get some work done."

"Aw, hon—are you at work on the weekend again? That damn boss of yours, that Phelps is a slave driver. You need a new job, ya know that?"

"Yeah, I know," I muttered. "A new job, a new man, a new life ... you name it, I need a new one."

"Well at least you got a new dog," she pointed out. "And as for the man, don't worry, Jelly. Doug is not the end all and be all. There're plenty of fish in the sea and you're gorgeous."

"Thanks, Patty," I said, smiling. "I better get going now."

"Okay. Love ya, doll." She blew me a noisy kiss.

"You too," I said and hung up.

Barbara called me not long after I hung up with Patty and we had almost the same conversation but without the jokes and gum snapping. I almost told her about the weird dream I'd had the night before but something stopped me. It was just too embarrassing—almost like I wanted a man in my life so badly that my subconscious was making one up. In the end I just thanked her for Shadow and promised to meet up the following week.

By the time I was ready to call it a day it was getting near dark. I had grabbed lunch out of a vending machine but I wondered guiltily if the dog food I'd left out had been enough for my new pet. Also, if he hadn't used the paper he'd be dying to go by now. I was really going to have to find a way get away from the office more if I was going to be a responsible pet owner.

Shadow greeted me eagerly when I got home. Jumping up to place his huge front paws on my shoulders, he gave me a big wet kiss on the cheek.

"Easy boy," I said laughing and wiping my damp cheek with my sleeve. More dry cleaning bills, but how can you be angry with somebody who's so happy to see you?

"I'm glad to see you too," I told him. "I know you're probably dying to get out of here. How 'bout you run to the park like I promised you?"

He barked loudly and the big plummy tail swished eagerly.

"Okay then," I said. "I just have to change and let's see if we have anything to clean up in here." I looked down at the papers which seemed to have been rearranged somewhat but there was no mess to be found. I read a few headlines as I gathered the paper together. It looked like the Diamondbacks had lost another game. They stunk ever since they had gotten rid of Schilling. Normally I'm not a big sports fan, but I do like baseball.

Then I saw something else which gave me a chill, another woman had been raped in my area code. This was the sixth one and the police were saying that it looked like the work of the same man and were asking women alone to be careful.

Although none of us had said it, I knew that the serial rapist who had been making the papers for almost two weeks now was the major reason Barb and Patty wanted me to have a guard dog.

Well, now I had one. I shrugged off the dark mood and finished gathering the papers. I threw the rest of the paper in the recycling bin and grabbed the remote to switch off the TV when something struck me as strange.

"Hey," I said, turning off the TV. "Didn't I leave you watching 'Animal Planet'? So how come ESPN is on now?"

Shadow barked twice and I had the strangest feeling he was laughing at me. Was I going crazy or what? I was certain that I had left the TV tuned to 'Animal Planet' and the remote had been in the same

place on top of the TV where I left it. So how had the station gotten changed? I looked at Shadow and then back at the remote which seemed to be slightly damp. I shook my head.

"No way. No ...way," I emphasized out loud. "C'mon, boy, let's get out of here. I need some fresh air."

* * * * *

White Tank Mountain Park was an expanse of desert plain, scattered with native vegetation that held intertwining trails leading up to the mountain and its hidden canyons. I'd always lived in Arizona so the lack of Kelly green grass and deciduous trees didn't bother me, although I knew a lot of people that had moved here from more temperate climates that missed it terribly. The desert has its own green, and I found it beautiful.

I let Shadow off his leash and he immediately trotted behind a convenient Palo Verde tree and squatted. He seemed to be taking a long time and I walked around to see if he was still there.

"Everything okay, boy?" I asked.

He gave me a look I would have sworn was one of offended modesty then stood and trotted around behind a large concealing sage bush to finish his business.

"Okay, okay," I muttered, leaving him to it. "So you're a private bathroom person too, I guess." Except he wasn't a person. I would really have to make more of an effort to remember that.

He finished and came galloping back to me, tongue hanging out in doggy enjoyment. I grinned and ruffled his fur.

"You wanna go for a run? Is that it, boy?" I asked.

He barked and took off like a flash.

"No fair getting a head start," I yelled, sprinting to catch up. I've never been much of a jogger. (Patty always teases me that if I run too fast I might give myself two black eyes—ha-ha, very funny.) But I could tell that Shadow was really enjoying himself after being cooped up in the house all day, so I didn't try to call him back even when I got out of breath myself and had to slow to a walk. He got further and further ahead of me in the deepening dusk, disappearing into a small black dot on the horizon behind the gorgeous sunset.

"Hey, don't get too far ahead!" I yelled but my only answer was a far-off bark. I hoped he'd come back when I called him in earnest. He seemed like a good, obedient dog but maybe I shouldn't have been so quick to let him off the leash. There was nothing to do about it now but keep walking, however, which I did while wishing I had picked a park that was a little better lit.

The sunset was beautiful—desert sunsets always are. Burnt umber and vermilion and blood red faded slowly behind the mountain, leaving a sky that was bruise-colored and silent. I could see the ghost of the almost full moon high in the sky but aside from that, the park was awash in deep darkness. The orange sodium lights from the parking lot did almost nothing to dispel the gloom.

A warm, dry wind ruffled my hair and I walked on up the black-top path that curved into the night. I was wishing I had brought the canister of mace Barb had given me when Douglas had first moved out. I kept meaning to attach it to my key-ring and kept forgetting to do it.

"Shadow?" I called nervously but there wasn't even a distant bark in return.

Great, I knew I shouldn't have let him off the leash. I began to have that itchy, prickly sensation between my shoulder blades you get when you feel like you're being watched. *Just your imagination*, told myself. *Stop being so jumpy*.

But the feeling just wouldn't go away.

"Shadow?" I called again but the voice that answered me wasn't my new pet's.

"Hey sweetheart, lookin' for some company?"

I turned quickly, feeling my heart pound in my throat to see the large, bulky shape of a man

approaching me in the gloom.

"Actually, I'm calling my dog." I said it as calmly as I could but my voice still came out high and nervous. "He's quite large and ... and extremely vicious."

"That right?" There was a sneer in his voice that said he didn't believe me for a second.

"Yeah," I said, my voice trembling a lot more than I would've liked. "He's trained to attack on command." As I spoke I realized that I had no idea if Shadow was protective or not. Possibly he was one of those dogs that was just a big softie and wouldn't hurt a fly.

A friend of Patty's had a Doberman like that. To see it, you'd think it would tear you to shreds but it wouldn't attack anybody—just too lazy and good natured, Patty's friend insisted. But regardless of whether he was viciously protective or not, at least Shadow was imposing, and I was wishing with all my heart that I hadn't let him run free off the leash and get away from me.

"Shadow," I called again, raising my voice above the chirping crickets. My only answer was the long, liquid howl of a coyote. It was a desolate sound that tore at my insides.

"Seems like your doggie ain't here 'less that was him just now," remarked the man. He moved closer suddenly and I realized I was just standing there like an idiot in the darkness, watching this stranger advance on me.

"He'll be here any minute," I said, backing up a step, not wanting to take my eyes off the approaching shape. I still couldn't see his face but the black outline of his body against the night sky was huge and menacing.

"Uh-huh." He continued to advance.

"Stay away from me," I said, backing up another step.

He came towards me again, apparently through with talking. I saw something glint silver and sharp in one of his hands.

I took another step back, a huge, fumbling gesture, what we called a 'giant' step when we were kids. My foot landed on a loose stone in the path and suddenly I was on my back, the wind knocked out of me with a harsh gasp.

The man laughed, a hoarse, eager sound that was somehow greedy. The silver flashed in his hand again, the cold moonlight skating along the edge of a blade and I knew it was a knife. I didn't have the breath to scream though he was towering over me like an evil ogre in a fairy tale. But this wasn't a fairy tale, it was a nightmare.

"Please..." I formed the word with my lips but no sound came out. This wasn't how they taught you to do things in self-defense class, I reminded myself. You were supposed to scream and make as much noise and trouble for your attacker as possible. But the fall had winded me and I felt like my heart was pounding right between my teeth. I couldn't breathe past its frantic bulk.

"This is how it's gonna be," he said, kneeling in front of me and placing a rough hand on the inside of my thigh. I had changed into shorts and a t-shirt before taking Shadow to the park. Now I wished I had on long pants, something that offered more protection.

"Please," I said again. This time the words were audible, at least to me. I felt frozen in place.

"You're gonna come with me and we'll have a little fun," he continued as though I hadn't spoken at all. His breath smelled like stale beer and peanuts. "You keep quiet and maybe I'll let you go afterwards." The long silver blade was suddenly inches from my face and the hand on my thigh clamped down in a hard pinch that made me gasp.

All I could think was, *Oh, God, I'm going to die.*

"Leave her alone."

For a moment I couldn't figure out where this new voice was coming from and then I realized that someone was looming over my attacker in the darkness. The moon was behind him and I couldn't see his face but his eyes glinted fiercely in the gloom the way an animal's eyes will glow in the dark.

The eyes in the dark seemed to galvanize me, give me strength somehow. I pulled back my leg and punched it forward, catching the man leaning over me with as much force as I could in the throat. His attention had been focused on the voice behind him and I caught him off guard.

With a strangled curse he tumbled to one side clawing at his neck as though he had a bone stuck in his throat. The man with the glowing eyes caught him neatly and I had a blurred impression of several swift, brutal blows being landed as I scrambled away.

The back of my t-shirt had rucked up and the loose gravel, still warm from the scorching day-time sun scraped across it mercilessly. I managed to turn and get to my hands and knees and then to my feet. There were tiny pieces of gravel imbedded in my palms.

Behind me dull thuds and strangled cries let me know the beating was still going on but I didn't stop to see who was winning. I stumbled blindly along in the darkness, headed for the dim glow of the parking lot, just wanting to get away.

The sounds behind me stopped abruptly and I heard someone shouting.

"Hey, come back! I need to talk to you."

The voice sounded vaguely familiar but my world had narrowed to a round black tunnel with the silver shape of my little VW bug at the end of it. I fumbled in the pocket of my shorts for the keys, the breath tearing in my throat and the howls of coyotes in my ears. Far off in the distance there was an angry squeal of a javalina as something startled it.

I grasped the keys with numb fingers, pressing the locking mechanism and hearing the familiar double beep that let me know I was almost safe. I was scrabbling at the door handle when there was a familiar barking at my side. I turned to see Shadow's black wolf-like shape bounding up to me, pink tongue lolling out in a breathless pant.

"Shadow!" I threw my arms around the dog's neck and buried my face in his black ruff for a long moment, trembling and letting the good, clean scent of his warm fur fill my senses. I drew back for a moment when I felt something wet on his muzzle—blood. It was a sticky, nearly black smear on my fingers in the dark parking lot. He must have caught a rabbit.

There was a choking gurgle from the path where I had been attacked and I remembered that I had to get the hell away from there.

"C'mon, boy." I opened the VW's door with a shaking hand and gestured him inside.

Shadow looked at the open door but instead of getting in he moved to get in front of me. The fur over his body seemed to lift, making him look twice as large and a low, rumbling growl built in his throat.

"Shadow, come on! We don't have time for this." I motioned at the open door and he moved reluctantly to scramble across the seats. I got in behind him and slammed the door, jabbing the key into its slot and shoving the little car into gear.

It wasn't until I had cleared the park's parking lot and was half way home that I felt safe enough to drive anything approaching the speed limit. I turned to see Shadow staring at me, the full moon reflected in his big brown eyes. He looked out the window for a moment and gave a menacing growl.

"So, now you get all protective. Where were you a minute ago when that man was all over me?" I muttered.

He looked back at me and voiced a soft whine that sounded almost apologetic.

"Yeah, well," I said. "~~If that other guy hadn't been there ... but for all I know he had the same thing~~ in mind as the first guy."

Shadow gave two short, sharp barks and pawed at my leg.

"Yeah, that's what you say," I told him, frowning. I felt like there was a thin veneer of ice over everything I said and saw. A layer of distance separating me from everything that had just happened me, or I guess I should say *almost* happened. Everything on the road looked very sharp and clear for some reason. The outline of Shadow's pointed ears against the night sky outside the window looked like a paper cut-out in the dark.

"That's the last time I let you off the leash, buddy," I told him. And I meant it.

Chapter Seven

We were at the house in what seemed like a ridiculously short amount of time. I got out of the car and let us in, still feeling that thin layer of numbing ice over my emotions.

I dumped water and food into Shadow's double sided bowl feeling like a robot and then climbed the stairs. It had been a very, very long day. I decided I was going to take a shower and go straight to bed.

At the back of my mind a little voice was screaming that I had been attacked and I ought to do something about it. But do what? Tell the police? It seemed like too much trouble when I felt so numb. So tired and cold.

I let the hot spray wash over me until I warmed up and then shut off the water, feeling if anything even more tired. I rubbed my hair dry roughly with a towel before sliding into bed, too exhausted to even bother with digging up a nightshirt to wear. It was over and I needed to sleep. I would worry about a police report in the morning.

I lay there, curled in on myself, feeling numb, but sleep wouldn't visit me. Over and over I kept reliving the feel of the man's hand on my thigh, the stale beer on his breath, the silver glint of moonlight skating over the blade of his knife. What if he had somehow followed me? What if he was outside the house?

What if...

My bedroom door opened with a low, shuttering creak and I felt a scream catch in my throat. There there was the sound of toenails clicking on the hard-wood floor and rough fur insinuated itself under my palm.

The scream rushed out of me in a low, breathy gasp as I felt the familiar cool nose tickle my fingertip.

"Shadow," I whispered. "Good boy."

I fondled the fuzzy ears for a long time and finally the familiar warmth of my bed and the soft sound of his breathing lulled me to sleep...

"Please..." I say. "Please..." It sounds so stupid. Why can't I say anything else? Scream, shout, make a commotion. They always tell you to yell "fire" instead of "help" because people pay more attention if they might be in danger too.

But the only word that comes out of my mouth is that one syllable supplication. A prayer of one single word that makes no sense.

"Please..."

The man is on top of me.

"This is how it's gonna be," he says, faceless in the dark, nameless and menacing. "You and me are gonna have a little fun."

I want to shriek for help or shout for him to get off of me but nothing comes out. Nothing at all besides...

"Please."

I might be begging him to stop or begging him to do it. How could anyone watching my pitiful performance tell the difference?

He looms over me, stale beer, dark eyes, harsh hands, bright knife, He is happy to have such an easy victim, such a willing supplicant...

"Please...Please..."

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